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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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DISASTER IN CENTRAL AMERICA

The United States is deeply involved in reckless military and political activity in Central America. Too many people in government and in the media are predicting that things will go badly. They are already going badly. Our involvement is already quite extensive.

I doubt if anyone will write about Central America without mentioning Vietnam. There is no way that the policy debate about Central America can escape direct comparison with the war in South-east Asia.

I have no intention of preparing a college term paper on the topic, "Central America and Vietnam: Similarities and Differences". I readily concede that there are differences. It is the similarities that keep me awake at night. Let me mention only the more important ones.

First, the forces with which we are aligned have not in the past, and do not now show any appreciation for democratic values. It does not matter whether we call them right-wing dictatorships, autocratic rulers or fledgling democracies. None enjoy popular support.

Second, "our side" just happens to be more corrupt and less efficient than those we oppose. This is especially clear in El Salvador. Press reports from that unfortunate country continue to indicate that barely discernible movement is being made by the army away from its past pattern of fighting from nine to five. I mention this not because I want the El Salvadoran army to be more active; but because I want to indicate how shallow the support is for the government--even among those who are paid and trained to defend it.

Third, American involvement is increasing exponentially. In just the past few months, we have seen our role grow from that of a small number of advisors (now called "trainers") to that of a power converting Honduran land and sea space into first quality naval and ground installations. (Visitors to Vietnam still remark on what a terrific job Americans did building harbors, bases and landing strips.) We are now conducting huge "exercises"--ostensibly to "deliver a message."

Fourth, just last week Henry Kissinger was appointed to head a commission to "review" (is "rationalize" a better term?) our policy in Central America. The first public action he took was to denounce American dissidents who "undermine" our policy and "divide" our people. Precisely this kind of rhetoric delayed for years the opposition needed to end our disastrous role in Vietnam.

I have joined with like-minded members of the House and Senate in a solemn commitment to withstand accusations of being unpatriotic and indifferent to communism as we continue to oppose President Reagan's policies.

I have no illusion about the left-wing guerrillas in El Salvador or the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. I know perfectly well that these forces are supplied by the Soviet Union and other Eastern bloc countries. I am deeply concerned about ties between them and the P.L.O. I DO NOT, HOWEVER, BELIEVE AN AMERICAN WAR WILL SOLVE THESE PROBLEMS.

In this short column, I cannot even sketch the historical background of the current conflict or my own ideas for U.S. policy in Central America. Right now our top priority should be to communicate to the President and his congressional supporters the price that will be paid in lost lives and incalculable suffering in Central America if the current policy continues, the American people will eventually condemn President Reagan and the Republican Party. By then it will be too late for the victims--both American and Latino.

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